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### **Environmental Protection and the Elderly**

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Aging is characterized by increased vulnerability to stress of all kinds. Given the fact that those aged 65 years and older are the most rapidly increasing fraction of the U.S. population, this characteristic of aging indicates a public health problem of large potential impact. There are three issues of concern which are amenable to, indeed demand, government intervention in order to avoid future crises. All three directly affect daily health and the well-being of the elderly. The first regards the quality of the air we breathe. The easing of government standards on air pollution will be expected to affect pulmonary function and increase morbidity disproportionately in the elderly. The second issue is that our society is increasingly sedentary. Habitual physical activity, involving both aerobic and strength training, is essential for the maintenance of health, especially in the elderly. The third issue regards the almost complete public ignorance on appropriate nutrition and the devastating effects in old age of bad lifelong dietary habits.

Current research indicates the prevalence of these problems in our society, as well as the enormous benefits which may follow interventions correcting these trends. Air quality issues are addressed in detail by others. However, it should be noted that effects of aging on the pulmonary system constitutes one of the least-studied areas in all of gerontology and geriatrics. Loss of mobility in the elderly leads to frailty and expensive dependent care. Current research demonstrates that inexpensive training regimens can lead to maintenance of muscle function even in the very old. More research in this area could have enormous public benefit, both economic and for quality of life. Nutrition education of both physicians and of the general public is a national disgrace. This deficiency leads directly to outrageous claims, poor diets and impaired health especially in old age, but including the current epidemic of Type 2 diabetes in our society. Public and government awareness campaigns to address this situation, together with a doubling of funds devoted to nutritional research, are urgently needed.

The quality of the air we breathe, food we eat and the exercise we perform directly impact the way in which we age. All three deserve attention in order to save US taxpayers huge expenditures for elderly healthcare in the immediate future.